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INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN: SOME DEVELOPMENTS SINCE THE BEIJING CONFERENCE

Note by the ECE secretariat */

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Awareness of the role of institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women and the need for such mechanisms goes back to the middle of the 1970s. The first World Conference on Women, which took place in Mexico City and which marked International Women's Year, gave clear indications to Governments on this matter. Since then, the issue has been taken up regularly in the course of the activities that have been pursued at international level on the road to equality - the Decade for Women (1976-1985) and the United Nations conferences on women, held in Copenhagen (1980) and, particularly, in Nairobi (1985). But it was in the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA), adopted at the fourth Conference on Women, that the issue of institutional mechanisms came to the fore as one of the critical areas of the Platform.

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2. While in earlier documents the emphasis regarding the role of institutional mechanisms had been placed mainly on the advancement of women and, therefore, almost exclusively on women-specific issues, the Beijing Platform for Action brought about a new perspective, enlarging the scope of action of such mechanisms and giving a new meaning to their role and functions, as catalysts for significant political change in the strict sense of the word "political", that is to say, a new way of envisaging the management of the "polis", the global policies.

3. According to the Platform, national mechanisms are more than just agencies for the implementation of specific policies for the advancement of women; their "main task is to support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender equality perspective in all policy areas" 1/. And the necessary conditions for their effective functioning, still according to the PFA, include:

(a) Their positioning at the highest possible level of government, under the responsibility of a Cabinet minister;

(b) Decentralized planning, implementation and monitoring, involving non-governmental and community organizations;

(c) Adequate human and financial resources;

(d) The possibility of influencing development of all government policies.

4. Envisaged as such, the role of institutional mechanisms is significantly broadened and deepened, a development that apparently has some difficulty in being translated into reality, according to the information that it was possible to collect from different sources 2/ on the situation in different countries.

5. A first impression that emerges from this information is that, in many cases, institutional mechanisms are actually going through a phase of transition as regards their own nature, their role and functions. There has been a shift from a perspective of advancement of women to one of gender equality which involves both women and men; there has also been a development from mechanisms of a specific nature and limited mandate, mainly social in character, into mechanisms of a more general character and of an increasingly recognized political nature.

6. This change has consequences as regards the nature and the tasks of institutional mechanisms, but such consequences are not always clear in terms of the designation of the mechanisms or of the tasks attributed to them. In the Platform, even though the expression, "mechanisms for the advancement of women", is retained as the title of the so-called critical area, the substance of their mandate goes beyond this view, extending to gender equality and the mainstreaming of such a dimension into general policies.

7. The same happens in certain member countries, where there is a fluctuation between the two perspectives which is reflected in the designations adopted and in the responsibilities entrusted. Apparently, new difficulties arise from this transition that is taking place in different ways and at different stages in the various countries.

8. It is a movement of change, for which the contribution of the PFA was decisive, but which had in fact already started in a number of countries, as a natural development, well in line with the evolution of equality issues from the perspective of women only to that of gender, including women and men and affecting the whole of society.

9. Such an evolution, particularly in those countries where the tradition of dealing with these issues was well-rooted, has meant that such mechanisms have become broader in their scope of action and in their responsibilities, and more diversified in nature and in ways and levels of acting. This situation is one that does not prevail in every country, as, particularly in those countries where equality concerns are of more recent origin or where the process of democratization is still in its early stages, institutional mechanisms in the area of equality are still incipient and their institutionalization seems to encounter particular difficulties.

10. At the outset, therefore, it is important to stress the need for a clear understanding of the functions of equality mechanisms, both the traditional tasks and the new perspectives that the development of equality philosophy and equality strategies has brought about. The role is one that requires not only specific policies regarding the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and the promotion of their status and situation, a perspective that necessarily includes positive action, but also the promotion and effective implementation of gender mainstreaming in all policies and programmes that come under the responsibility of government, at all levels of action.

11. Specific policies and the promotion of gender mainstreaming constitute a twofold dimension of equality policies. Awareness of this fact had been developing in many countries and international forums, even before the Beijing conference. In the conclusions of the International Workshop on National Machinery to promote Equality between Women and Men in Central and Eastern European Countries 3/, organized by the Council of Europe in Ljubljana in 1994, we read:

> "Particular emphasis was laid on the twofold dimension that equality policies pursued by equality machinery must espouse: on the one hand, the horizontal dimension of these policies, cutting across all sectors and areas of government, in order to guarantee a gender perspective in the

policies adopted; on the other hand, specific policies and programmes, both in traditional areas of government responsibility (e.g. education, health and employment) and in "new" areas which have recently been made visible in the political arena, such as violence against women, the growing feminisation of poverty, traffic in women, etc.".

12. But it was after the Beijing conference that such a view was accepted by the international community as a whole, a view that is also a new commitment on the part of member States. Such emphasis on gender mainstreaming in no way implies that specific equality policies are to be replaced or made redundant. On the contrary, both approaches must go hand in hand, contributing to mutual success.

13. The final report of the Council of Europe Group of Specialists on Mainstreaming 4/, which was published in 1998, rightly states:

"Gender mainstreaming cannot replace and render redundant specific equality policy and machineries. When mainstreaming is mentioned as a new strategy to achieve gender equality, it is always stressed that this strategy does not replace "traditional" gender equality policy, but complements it. They are two different strategies to reach the same goal, i.e. gender equality, and must go hand in hand, at least until there is a real culture and consensus regarding gender equality in the whole of society. The question is how gender mainstreaming relates to specific equality policy and why it is still necessary to have "traditional" forms of equality policy. The main difference between mainstreaming and specific gender equality policies is the actors involved and the policies that are chosen to be addressed . The starting point for "traditional" forms of equality policy is a specific problem resulting from gender inequality. A specific policy for that problem is then developed by an equality machinery. The starting point for mainstreaming is a policy which already exists. The policy process is then reorganised so that the actors usually involved take a gender perspective into account, and gender equality as a goal is reached.".

14. The Group goes on to define the role of equality mechanisms in this new perspective:

"There is an important role for gender equality machineries and their actors in this: constituting a think tank having the knowledge and input at their disposal, they can give the necessary backup ... they carry out important general reflections on mainstreaming and disseminate knowledge and information on gender issues to the actors and to society in general. ...[they] can bring important gender issues to the fore and put pressure on policy-makers ... [they] are the actors who reflect on

the government's fundamental role in redressing gender relations." (p.17).

15. In this light, the role of equality mechanisms is both old and new. The old role was to promote equal opportunity legislation and anti-discrimination laws, and the capacity to monitor their implementation; conduct research and training on equality and gender issues; provide information and awareness-raising regarding the same matters; carry out specific actions and projects to address women's problems and concerns, etc.

16. The new role refers mainly to the need for these mechanisms to act as catalysts for gender mainstreaming and its functioning in the governmental system as a whole. Gender mainstreaming, because of its all-inclusive nature, is a strategy for which equality mechanisms are only partly responsible; the full responsibility for its implementation lies with a multiplicity of actors, all those with the power and responsibility to decide on the political management of society.

17. What then, in a few words, are the responsibilities of equality mechanisms in this perspective? The debate is open on this subject in a number of countries, as mentioned in some reports. One answer is that they can perform their role, inter alia, by building awareness, putting forward proposals, applying pressure, gathering expertise, training other actors, establishing networks, coordinating action, monitoring developments, evaluating implementation, and so on.

18. Most of our countries still seem to have a long way to go, as regards full acceptance of gender equality requirements, of the different strategies that are recognized as necessary to achieve what is nowadays a general objective of society and of how these strategies must match one another to be fully effective.

II. PANORAMA OF MAJOR TRENDS

19. If institutional mechanisms are taken to be those set up by political authorities, they are then offshoots of government at national level or other levels, depending on the structure of the country in question.

20. The first observation that can be made is not a new one. It refers to the great diversity of institutional mechanisms as regards status, structure, authority and means of action, in terms of both human and financial resources.

21. As regards status and location, the great majority of mechanisms consist of departments, units or committees within ministries, mostly those responsible for labour and social affairs. Other areas associated with women

and equality issues, though less often, are family, youth, health, justice, culture, etc.

22. In some cases, the mechanisms come under the Prime Minister, more rarely under the Presidency. An interesting case is that of New Zealand, where the Prime Minister, a woman, appointed in 1997, retained the women's affairs portfolio. There is also the case of Japan, where the Prime Minister himself is the head of the national machinery.

23. A few countries have independent ministries or ministers with the equality or women's affairs portfolio. For some this is already a tradition, while for others it is an innovation, justified by the increasing political importance of equality matters following the Beijing conference.

24. Another type of institutional mechanism is that which has a status independent from the government, like ombuds or equality agencies with specific mandates. The ombuds model, which is typical of Nordic countries, is apparently finding acceptance elsewhere, e.g. in Lithuania, where an ombuds for equality of opportunities between men and women was appointed in 1999.

25. One interesting development is the creation in some countries of special structures having an interdepartmental nature, with the purpose of translating the commitments of the Platform for Action into national action plans. Of course, interdepartmental structures of various kinds existed already in several countries, but these commitments provided grounds for strengthening.

26. Moreover, the creation of new mechanisms was a fact after the Beijing conference, particularly in several countries of central and eastern Europe, but also in some western countries. In other cases existing mechanisms were granted new, broader tasks. Others apparently remained unchanged.

27. Another interesting aspect is the existence of mechanisms at parliamentary level - committees and subcommittees. Information on this subject is incomplete but it can be said that such mechanisms tend to develop, not only in western countries with longer traditions in this field, but also in central and east European countries, where concern for gender issues is of more recent origin in the context of the democratization process.

28. In spite of the diversity of mechanisms and the variety of responses made at national level to implement the commitments of the Beijing conference, some common trends of development can be distinguished.

29. There seems to be a movement towards multiplication and decentralization of mechanisms, both a horizontal movement - creation of structures in various departments - and a vertical one - creation of structures at various levels:

provincial, regional, local - particularly in countries with a longer tradition in equality matters.

30. In many cases, where mechanisms had started with specific mandates in a given field of action, usually labour and economic life, the need was felt to broaden the mandates or create new mechanisms of a more all-embracing nature or in other relevant fields. In other cases, mechanisms had started with the task of dealing with all aspects of women's participation in social life and, later on, the need was felt for mechanisms of a more specific nature in certain areas - work, education, health, civil service, etc.

31. These past trends are now reinforced by the creation of an increasing number of structures in the various areas of political and administrative decision-making - units, departments, committees, councils, special offices, etc.; reinforced also by the creation of a number of mechanisms at all levels - federal, regional, provincial, local - whatever the administrative structure may be.

32. This development, which is particularly visible in some west European countries, as well as in Canada, is probably one answer to the increasing demand to mainstream gender equality concerns into all policies and programmes, at all levels.

33. It is, on the other hand, one of the differences compared with most central and east European countries, where equality mechanisms generally exist at central government level only or, in a few cases, do not exist at all.

34. Another noteworthy trend is the growing awareness of the importance of cooperation with civil society, women's NGOs and other community organizations, as meaningful channels for mainstreaming and as privileged partners of political power in society. In several equality structures, the place of NGOs is recognized and mechanisms of institutionalized cooperation have been created in consultative councils or commissions. Several reports mention that cooperation with, and support for, NGOs is even part of the mechanisms' mandate.

35. A very positive, but not unexpected, trend is the almost general adoption of a national plan of action for equality, in which the institutional mechanisms play an important role. Being a recommendation included in the PFA, it apparently works as a source of political legitimacy, both for the adoption of the plans and for the meaningful role of equality mechanisms. In some cases, special interdepartmental structures have been set up to prepare and monitor these plans and to ensure their mainstreaming capacity, a fact found both in Western and in central and east European countries.

36. However, apart from these common trends, differences can also be detected. To simplify what is a diversified and complex pattern, it can be said that there are two broad categories of countries as regards the nature and structure of institutional mechanisms for equality and for the advancement of women.

37. On the one hand, there are countries with a certain tradition in equality policies, where institutional mechanisms have stronger roots and more clearly recognized political "legitimacy"; and on the other hand, there are countries with a much shorter history regarding the establishment of equality policies and where these new structures, many of them only set up after the Beijing conference, are more vulnerable and have less well-defined mandates.

38. Generally speaking, the first category includes many western countries, European and others, while the second comprises in particular countries in transition.

39. With regard to the first group, the main trends of development consist, in very broad terms, of:

(a) An expansion or multiplication of equality mechanisms, with the creation of women's divisions, units, committees of experts or councils, both in government departments at national level and at provincial, regional and local level (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom);

(b) A certain upgrading of equality policies, in some cases with the creation of autonomous ministries responsible for questions of equality (e.g. Denmark, Italy and Portugal) or women (e.g. United Kingdom);

(c) Greater emphasis on the coordination of equality policies, in follow-up to the commitments made at the Beijing conference, sometimes at interdepartmental level (e.g. Finland, France, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey) and in other cases at ministerial level. In the United Kingdom, besides the women's unit and an interdepartmental group of senior officials, there is a Cabinet subcommittee on women, which draws together ministers from all the major ministries to put the women's agenda at the centre of government;

(d) Increasing consideration of gender aspects in laws, policies, programmes, statistics and indicators and the creation, albeit at a very early stage in most cases, of instruments and tools to evaluate the implementation of mainstreaming;

(e) Increased awareness of the need to cooperate with NGOs pursuing women's interests or equality objectives, as well as to support their activities;

(f) Awareness, in some cases, of the fact that institutional mechanisms are going through a transitional phase and that their role and tasks must be reconsidered and given greater visibility and legitimacy.

40. As for the second group of countries, the main features may be summarized as follows:

(a) Institutional mechanisms, which often fall within the scope of labour and social affairs and are grouped together with matters of family, children and youth, are apparently weak structures, frequently affected by governmental changes;

(b) The mandates of national mechanisms are generally rather vague, although some discussion seems to be under way concerning their role and tasks. The main emphasis is on women and non-discrimination, but there are also cases where the formulation starts to appear in terms of gender equality;

(c) The PFA spurred the creation of institutional mechanisms in several countries, as well as the drafting and adoption of national action plans and, in certain instances, the creation of interdepartmental structures for their implementation (ex. Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia) 5/;

(d) The possibility of enacting a law on equality is mentioned in several cases as being a priority task; in the case of Lithuania, a law of that nature was adopted in 1998;

(e) Regarding cooperation with NGOs, there generally are no formal, institutional channels for regular cooperation but, in an increasing number of cases, women's NGOs, which are becoming very active in several countries of this part of Europe, have been involved in certain activities, such as the drafting of the national action plans (e.g. Bulgaria, Latvia, Hungary).

41. On the whole, it may be said that, in spite of weaknesses, there was a general movement towards the creation and institutionalization of equality machinery within the governmental structures of a significant number of ECE countries over the last five years. This went hand in hand with an increasing recognition that the issue of equality is not only a social problem, but also a democratic and human rights issue and a responsibility of the State.

III. OBSTACLES ENCOUNTERED

42. Whatever the differences between countries and regions within the ECE region and the different stages of advancement of equality matters in the hierarchy of political priorities, differences which are closely tied to

existing political and social realities, there are also some common obstacles to the social and political acceptance of institutional mechanisms for equality and their role and tasks.

43. Among the obstacles most frequently cited, the first is the fact that these mechanisms still work outside the mainstream of society and the mainstream of policies, as a general rule, albeit to different degrees in different countries. Nowhere has full integration and mainstreaming been achieved. Marginalized in some countries and with little influence in the political system or in policy-making in others, equality still has a long way to go before it gains political acceptance as a central issue of government.

44. A second major impediment to progress is the fact that these mechanisms work in a male-dominated environment ruled by a male-pattern system, with a minority participation of women, which makes it more difficult for equality issues and for the real-life experiences of inequality to permeate the environment where decisions that affect the life of all, women and men, are taken. This situation adds urgency to the achievement of what is now a democratic requirement in national and international agendas: the balanced participation of women and men in decision-making.

45. A third obstacle that appears in some evaluations lies in the fact that gender equality as a political responsibility is still envisaged, in many cases, as equality before the law. Whether this first stage of building gender equality has been achieved or is still in progress, it is sometimes difficult to understand that social and cultural change in the same direction is also a political responsibility and not just something that will come about naturally with the passage of time.

46. The fact that in a number of countries the issue of equality is still predominantly formulated in terms of the status of women can also be a source of difficulty. The new focus on gender calls for strategies which go beyond concentrating only or mainly on women, acknowledging that, if changes are to occur, they must affect the position of both sexes in a structural way.

47. The lack of understanding of mainstreaming strategy can be another source of difficulty. Misunderstanding of the difference between, and the objectives of, specific equality policies and the mainstreaming of a gender perspective must be clarified. On the other hand, concrete ways to mainstream the gender perspective in some "hard" areas such as finance, defence and energy must also be worked out and clarified.

48. However, even where there is a clear, or growing, understanding of the objectives and workings of the mainstreaming strategy, difficulties arise from the non-existence of instruments to evaluate gender impact and measure the

gender success or failure of policies and programmes. In particular, little progress has been made on the adoption of indicators and benchmarks in the areas of major importance for gender equality.

49. Other obstacles concern the conditions of work imposed on institutional mechanisms. Unclear, vague mandates are often mentioned as a problem, mainly in recently established mechanisms. Scarcity of resources, both human and financial, is another.

50. In some cases, reference is made to the difficulties arising from the disconnection from civil society and the need for greater cooperation with civil society, women's NGOs and other community groups. This should take place through formal and informal channels, thus creating the possibility of a two-way line of communication, which is absolutely necessary in order to solve problems that affect people's everyday lives.

51. Ultimately, the difficulties arise from a lack of understanding of the political significance of gender equality issues, as issues of democracy and as issues of human rights. For that reason, they are kept outside the mainstream of political decisions.

IV. POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS AND PRACTICES

52. As a final comment on the panorama of major developments, there are some positive developments that, in spite of difficulties and obstacles, have become a reality. These developments come under the headings of specific policies and of mainstreaming a gender dimension into general policies.

53. The first achievement is certainly the progress of the mainstreaming strategy, incipient as it is in most countries. It is a strategy that in many places is still ambiguous or misunderstood, but for which the need is widely felt. Debate and research are still going on, and political directives are appearing in some cases.

54. The reports reveal different approaches to mainstreaming. Some countries consider that it is the responsibility of equality mechanisms to pursue and achieve mainstreaming of gender equality; others consider that such a responsibility is one for the whole government and that institutional mechanisms have only to promote it, monitor its implementation, provide expertise on equality issues, evaluate results, etc.

55. Notwithstanding these differences, some examples of successful or promising strategies deserve mention. A first positive aspect of such strategies consists, in a number of cases, of a basic attitude of listening to women and taking stock of their situation in reality. Such a line of action

has been followed in several countries and in different ways. In the United Kingdom, an exercise was even named "Listening to Women". It is conducted at various levels and is expected to provide the Government with a rich source of data and a new means of involving civil society. In other countries, a similar concern has led to more regular, and sometimes institutionalized, cooperation with NGOs, which are called upon to bring a "touch of reality", that is their own, into programmes and policies.

56. On the other hand, renewed attention to gendered statistics is also referred to in several reports as being a new or growing concern. The need for new gender indicators, both quantitative and qualitative, is also stressed. Canada, for example, and Spain have been developing gender equality indicators and applying them to gender-based policy research in several areas.

57. Attention to reality is an ongoing process. Another way that has been found to keep in touch with reality and evaluate changes has been the establishment of observatories to monitor different aspects. In France, an observatory on parity of women and men has been created, and in Portugal one on equality of employment opportunities, specifically on collective bargaining agreements, while in Spain a mechanism on the portrayal of women in advertising has existed for some time. Such mechanisms are intended to provide an accurate view of reality and to devise appropriate general and specific policies.

58. Regarding the strategy of mainstreaming, some interesting examples that reflect significant new expressions of a political will to move towards the goal of equality can be mentioned. In Italy, for example, the Prime Minister in 1997 issued a directive that is, in itself, an overall programme addressed to all ministers, containing guidelines for action to implement the PFA. Within these guidelines, the directive stresses the need for adequate institutional mechanisms for permanent coordination among all government ministries and for regular monitoring of the gender impact of government policies. Other examples are the Interdepartmental Plan of Action on Gender Mainstreaming drawn up in the Netherlands in 1999, and the project being developed in Slovenia aimed at the establishment of gender mainstreaming as a standard tool for policy-making in the government.

59. Emphasis on mainstreaming implies also the preparation and adoption of certain tools. The absence of such tools is mentioned as a difficulty by many countries, but only a few have already embarked on creating them. Canada, some Nordic countries and the Netherlands are among those having developed methods and instruments for gender impact assessment and evaluation. Other countries have concentrated their effort on training experts and officers in equality matters, as the priority in implementing the mainstreaming strategy.

60. As previously mentioned, the mainstreaming approach does not obviate or weaken the need for specific actions; many reports are clear on this point. On the contrary, specific actions and specific areas of action have been consistently pursued by equality mechanisms in recent years.

61. They are not necessarily new areas; they follow closely the critical areas of the PFA, but renewed attention has been devoted to some of them. Priorities are different in different countries and depending on the situation in different regions. However, in the European region, national mechanisms have been called upon to act in recent years, in both "traditional" and "new" areas of concern.

62. As regards the first type, most reports refer to:

(a) The question of women and the economy, including the issues of equal treatment, the need for professional training and re-training of women, and the question of reconciling professional and family life, the question being formulated either in this way or in terms of family-friendly employment;

(b) The question of women's health, particularly as regards matters of sexuality, reproduction and reproductive rights.

63. As for the second type, the "new" areas of concern or those with greater visibility, the following are worthy of mention:

(a) The issue of violence, which is referred to in practically all reports and which is the subject of laws, research studies, campaigns, directives, etc.;

(b) The issue of trafficking in women, which is repeatedly referred to, particularly by central and east European countries, as one that is becoming increasingly serious and requiring coordinated political action;

(c) The question of the poverty of women, which is also referred to particularly by central and east European countries;

(d) The issue of women's access to power and decision-making, which is strongly emphasized by many countries, particularly western countries, implying legal and constitutional changes in some cases, recommendations and programmes of action, etc.

64. To sum up, it may be said that, in spite of the obstacles and difficulties encountered, and although no spectacular changes are apparent, a feeling remains that there is some movement in the political sphere towards building equality in the region.

65. The fact that the political meaning of the principle of equality is widely recognized is beginning to bear fruit at the level of institutional mechanisms, in terms of their power, role and tasks. They continue to be essential in the process of building equality, even though the range of actors involved is now wider in an increased number of countries. The feeling also remains that, despite the difficulty of going further and faster, there is no turning back.

V. AVENUES FOR FUTURE ACTION

66. While recognizing that the issue of institutional mechanisms for equality is a moving issue and that there are no fixed, ideal models, it is nevertheless important to sketch out some perspectives for the future in this matter. These could never be guidelines, in the strict sense of the word, as countries differ, both in social and cultural situations and as regards matters of equality. Moreover, institutional mechanisms, to be sustainable and effective, must fit into the national context and be sensitive to its values, standards and ways of thinking. However some basic principles must be defined.

67. First of all, as regards their status, location and resources, and even considering the present trend towards diversification of institutional mechanisms and all the positive aspects that such a trend implies, it is essential that the unit coordinating equality policies be placed at the highest level of government, under the direct responsibility of the President, the Prime Minister or the Cabinet minister in charge of equality matters.

68. Such a positioning is necessary to give this coordinating unit the "political legitimacy", authority and political power, not only to pursue specific actions, but above all to coordinate the process of mainstreaming gender equality in all sectors and policies.

69. Such coordinating capacity must also be granted to other mechanisms located at other levels - regional, provincial or local - so that policies at those levels also follow an integrated and coherent approach to equality.

70. This coordinating function requires the capacity to establish networks and work horizontally with all departments and sectors, whether at national level or at other levels where these mechanisms operate. In this perspective, the existence of focal points for equality (equality counsellors, equality units or similar structures) is essential. On the other hand, the institutionalization of such functions, through the establishment of interdepartmental or intersectoral structures with a given mandate, is important, both for planning and for evaluating programmes and activities.

71. As regards resources, it should be stressed that institutional mechanisms for equality, in order to be effective, require an adequate level of technical staff, with specialized qualifications and expertise in gender equality issues, as well as support and administrative staff. As for financial resources, no mechanism can perform its functions unless adequate budgetary provision is made for it in the state budget. Such a provision can be supplemented by other funding for specific actions or projects, according to the circumstances, but the main responsibility in this matter lies with the state authorities - national and others - as the issue of gender equality is a societal issue, for which those authorities are accountable.

72. As regards the role of institutional mechanisms, it has to move from a perspective of women only, to one of gender; from specific actions only, to overall action, involving new actors and new areas; from an emphasis on rules and norms, to an emphasis also on the real experiences of men and women and on the effects on their lives of measures and decisions adopted.

73. In defining the terms of reference and functions of institutional mechanisms, some basic principles must also be stressed.

74. The mandate must be clear and must give the mechanism the authority and legitimacy it needs to carry out its functions. These functions must include the two broad lines of action that are nowadays recognized as essential, namely:

(a) Specific policies, including positive action whenever necessary, in particular areas recognized as being critical for the advancement of women and the achievement of equality;

(b) Promotion, monitoring and evaluation of the strategy of mainstreaming a dimension of gender equality into all general policies and programmes.

75. In this light, the specific functions of institutional mechanisms can be identified as, for example:

(a) Regular analysis and evaluation of the situation of women and men in all areas, particularly in key areas for the advancement of women or the achievement of equality;

(b) Proposal and implementation of specific projects for the advancement of women, including positive action programmes in critical areas (e.g. legal literacy programmes, information and awareness-raising, capacity-building, professional qualification, political training, combat against violence, etc.);

(c) Proposal of anti-discrimination and equal opportunities legislation, where it does not exist, and systematic review of existing and pending legislation to ensure that they it takes gender aspects into due consideration;

(d) Systematic analysis of policies and programmes from a gender point of view, both in their planning phase and in their implementation and evaluation phases;

(e) Development and promotion of gender training programmes aimed at top-level management in government, at senior officials and other relevant actors at the various levels where decisions are taken;

(f) Development and/or promotion of adequate methods and instruments of analysis and evaluation, with a view to: (i) obtaining accurate knowledge of the situation of women and men at all levels of social life, including the use of gendered data and statistics, as well as relevant new indicators, both quantitative and qualitative, and of objective evaluation criteria; (ii) implementing gender mainstreaming and evaluating its impact; formulating guidelines for gender impact assessment, gender proofing, gender budgeting and benchmarking, gender audit of all policies, etc.

(g) Regular dissemination of results and good practice and regular reporting of progress to the relevant bodies, both national and international.

76. The establishment of links with organizations of civil society is gradually being recognized as an important dimension of the work of institutional mechanisms for equality. The newly recommended mainstreaming dimension makes this cooperation even more necessary and meaningful.

77. Civil society groups, women's organizations and all those pursuing equality objectives, can be an essential support for institutional mechanisms. As a matter of fact, the task of these mechanisms within government or the administration is often a very difficult one, in the sense that they have to question the status quo of social organization and the deeply rooted attitudes and beliefs that inspire it. The support of these groups that know the issues, their inspiration, demands and suggestions can therefore be a significant source of strength for institutional mechanisms. A policy of dialogue, interchange and networking with civil society organizations is an essential two-way strategy for the successful implementation of equality objectives.

78. Awareness of this fact, linked with the development of the mainstreaming philosophy, has led to the formal institutionalization of this cooperation, either through the integration of NGOs into consultative councils or other

similar bodies or through the establishment of regular consultation procedures.

79. This line of action should be pursued in the future, drawing on the knowledge and experience of NGOs in identifying areas of action, devising policies, establishing priorities, evaluating progress, etc. In practical terms, it should imply the involvement of NGOs, particularly those dealing with women's issues, equality questions or human rights matters, in drafting and implementing plans of action or specific projects, and in preparing national progress reports, including those to be presented to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. It should also imply the technical and financial support, by institutional mechanisms, of projects undertaken by those groups that fall within the ambit of the pursuit of equality objectives.

80. Links with other social actors, particularly the media and the research community, should also be considered by institutional mechanisms as particularly relevant for the accomplishment of their tasks.

81. As far as the media are concerned, and taking into account their independence and freedom of action, it is important to cooperate with their agents, by raising their awareness of gender equality issues and the corresponding implications for social organization, so that these concerns can be conveyed to public opinion.

82. Close cooperation with researchers and the academic community is also essential, as they can make a substantial contribution not only to the pursuit of research on equality policies, but also to the development of theoretical tools, namely for the integration of equality perspectives into overall policies.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

83. Envisaging equality policies in general terms as issues of a systemic nature, and particularly in terms of mainstreaming the equality dimension, has far-reaching consequences for the institutional mechanisms for equality, for their role and for the tasks they must perform.

84. Being mainly of a consultative nature, with the functions of providing proposals and opinions, acting as a think tank and promoting specific projects, they can not by themselves achieve the overall change that the philosophy of mainstreaming implies. This requires acceptance by the political authorities at all levels that this is a political issue and a decisive one, requiring a strong political commitment .

85. Institutional mechanisms can help to challenge political choices and political priorities, to re-think current political values and concepts. But such challenges must find an echo at the level of political decision-making.

86. Men are there; women must be there too. The strategy of mainstreaming, in the long run, poses the question of women's empowerment and of their equal participation in decision-making. This question is decisive and must also be dealt with by institutional mechanisms for equality. It is necessary to question the established male order of things, that creates a hostile environment for change towards equality.

87. Achievement of equality nowadays is a political issue, closely linked to the establishment and proper functioning of democracy and to the promotion and protection of fundamental rights.

88. It is in this light, and taking into account the political will required from decision-makers at all levels, that the issue of institutional mechanisms for equality, of their role and functions, must be seen now and in the future.

NOTES

1. "Platform for Action", para. 201

2. Information has been obtained mainly from answers to the United Nations questionnaire on the implementation of the PFA, from recent CEDAW reports and from the 1999 United Nations Directory of National Machinery for the Advancement of Women. Special thanks go to the Council of Europe, Section on Equality between Women and Men, for making available the very preliminary results of a survey on equality mechanisms in Member States of the organization.

3. "National machinery to promote equality between women and men in central and eastern European countries: establishing, implementing and making use of national machinery to promote equality - proceedings of an international workshop." Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 1998, p.133.

4. "Gender mainstreaming: conceptual framework, methodology and presentation of good practices - final report of the Group of Specialists on Mainstreaming." Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 1998, p.16.

5. For a detailed analysis of the development of institutional mechanisms in central and eastern Europe and the CIS countries, see the background paper submitted to the meeting by UNDP (document E/ECE/RW.2/2000/BP.1).